

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 15270

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PDEV, PGOV, UK

SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: GOVERNMENT MAY GIVE ON REFERENDUM

REF: LONDON A-668

SUMMARY. UNATTRIBUTED PRESS REPORTS INDICATE GOVERNMENT IS CONSIDERING POSSIBILITY OF REFERENDUM IN SCOTLAND ON DEVOLUTION AS QUID PRO QUO FOR SUPPORT OF LABOR ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS. AS YET WE HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO CONFIRM REPORTS WHICH, IF TRUE, WOULD REPRESENT MAJOR GOVERNMENT RETREAT AND BE INTERPRETED AS CLEAR INDICATION OF WEAKNESS. ONE ANTI-DEVOLUTIONIST TOLD EMBASSY THAT REPORT MAY BE PLANT BY ANTI-DEVOLUTION CAMP. EMBOFFS WILL BE SEEING GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND LEADING ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS NEXT WEEK AT LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE AND WILL ASSESS SITUATION BASED ON THESE MEETINGS. END SUMMARY.

1. GUARDIAN POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT IAN AITKEN SEPTEMBER 24 REPORTED THAT HMG IS "UNDERSTOOD TO HAVE OFFERED THE PROSPECT OF REFERENDUM (IN SCOTLAND) AFTER THE (DEVOLUTION) BILL HAS REACHED THE STATUTE BOOK. PROVIDED THAT LABOR'S POTENTIAL REBELS SWALLOW THEIR OBJECTIONS
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AND VOTE LOYALLY FOR THE BILL". AITKEN WENT ON TO ASSERT

THAT "SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE CABINET" HAD PUT THIS POSSIBILITY TO LEADING ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS. TIMES CARRIED SIMILAR STORY' REPORTING THAT "GOVERNMENT MINISTERS IN CHARGE OF DEVOLUTION PLANS ARE ACTIVELY CONSIDERING THE IDEA OF HOLDING A REFERENDUM ONCE THE DEVOLUTION BILL HAS BEEN PASSED". AND NOTING THAT REFERENDUM WOULD CONCERN ONLY SCOTLAND.

2. IF TRUE, THIS REPORT SUGGESTS GOVERNMENT IS SERIOUSLY CONCERNED THAT DEVOLUTION BILL MAY FAIL TO PASS AND, ACCORDINGLY, BELIEVES ITS POSITION IS WEAK. GOVERNMENT HERETOFORE HAS STEADFASTLY REFUSED TO CONSIDER POSSIBILITY REFERENDUM ON TWO COUNTS: ITS POTENTIAL DANGER AS A PRECEDENT; AND THE FACT THAT RESTRICTION OF REFERENDUM TO SCOTLAND AND/OR WALES WOULD BE LOGICALLY AND POLITICALLY INDEFENSIBLE WHEN ISSUE INVOLVES ENTIRE UK, WHERE ELECTORATE WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY VOTE IT DOWN.

3. WE HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO REACH POLITICAL OFFICIALS IN GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION UNIT TO VERIFY STORY. LEADING ANTI-DEVOLUTIONIST NEIL KINNOCK. HOWEVER, QUESTIONED ACCURACY OF REPORTS. KINNOCK DOES NOT BELIEVE LEADER OF HOUSE MICHAEL FOOT, WHO IS IN OVERALL CHARGE OF DEVOLUTION, WOULD EVER AGREE TO SUBMIT AN ACT OF PARLIAMENT TO EX POST FACTO REFERENDUM. HE ALSO DOUBTS THAT GOVERNMENT IS AT PRESENT PREPARED TO TIP ITS HAND ON REFERENDUM (THOUGH HE THINKS ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS IN LABOR PARTY WILL ULTIMATELY FORCE GOVERNMENT TO AGREE TO UK-WIDE REFERENDUM) ESPECIALLY IN LIGHT OF RECENT STATEMENTS OF FORMER TORY LEADERS HEATH AND HOME FAVORING REFERENDUM (REFAIR), OR THAT IT WOULD PROPOSE REFERENDUM JUST IN SCOTLAND. HE SUGGESTED THAT REPORT MAY HAVE BEEN FLOATED BY ERIC MOONMAN, ANOTHER ANTI-DEVOLUTIONIST, BASED ON VERY INFORMAL AND TENTATIVE DISCUSSIONS WITH OFFICIALS NOT DIRECTLY CONCERNED WITH DEVOLUTION. MOONMAN, HE SAID, HAS TACTICAL SKILL OF A "WOODEN POLICEMAN".

4. COMMENT. WE ARE INCLINED TO ACCEPT KINNOCK'S
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THESIS THAT REPORT IS PROBABLY EXAGGERATION OF GOVERNMENT'S POSITION. THOUGH WE CERTAINLY CANNOT CONFIRM SOURCE. EMBOFFS WILL BE MEETING WITH MINISTER FOR DEVOLUTION JOHN SMITH DURING LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE NEXT WEEK AND WILL SEEK FURTHER INFORMATION ON GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY. THEY WILL ALSO BE IN TOUCH WITH LEADING ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS. AS RECENTLY AS LAST WEEK. HOWEVER, ONE OF CALLAGHAN'S KEY AIDES TOLD EMBOFF THAT GOVERNMENT

DID NOT EXPECT TOO MUCH DIFFICULTY IN GETTING DEVOLUTION
BILL THROUGH COMMONS. AN ASSESSMENT WE CONTINUE TO
BELIEVE IS OVERLY SANGUINE.

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